

## **Comprehensive Exams (“Comps”) – Purpose, Preparation, and Performance**

### **OSU Department of Geography**

#### **Purpose**

Comprehensive exams (or “comps”) are administered as part of the process of determining whether graduate students are ready to be advanced to candidacy or whether there are areas in which additional work is necessary. PhD students in geography are expected to demonstrate extensive knowledge in three different subfields or subject areas that are relevant to their research. These subfields often align with the specialty groups of the AAG but should be developed in conjunction with the student’s advisor and committee. Thus, comps test knowledge of the literature in these different subfields, including how this literature pertains to the student’s dissertation research, theory, and methods. The focus of comps is not about how well a student can summarize material. Rather, students should be able to go beyond book or article summaries and develop their own views on the relevant theoretical and/or methodological implications of the scholarly literature by drawing connections among ideas and critically evaluating different approaches, frameworks, or evidence. Students should be prepared to thoroughly engage with the literature in ways that demonstrate synthesis of the literature and their own original and critical thought. How students perform on comps provides a useful indication of the extent to which students are prepared for their subsequent dissertation research and writing, as well as their future careers.

#### **Preparation and Format**

Since these are *comprehensive* exams, preparation for comps begins at the time a student enters our PhD program. No single course or book can prepare a student for comps. Rather, the entire body of work undertaken in graduate studies—whether or not it is directly relevant to a student’s research interests—lays a foundation for the comprehensive exam. Exposure to different ways of thinking, formulating theories, collecting and analyzing data, constructing arguments, or reasoning about ways to solve problems will help build a solid foundation.

As a general guide, the department recommends doctoral students do the following:

- (1) For every class taken, take notes on the readings and their significance to specific applications, methods, theory, or subfields.
- (2) As soon as possible, select an advisor and work with them to assemble a PhD committee. In addition to coursework—in consultation with the advisor and committee members—begin reading literature and scholarly works in selected areas of interest. Students may consider enrolling in GEOG 5930 (Readings in Geography) with committee members when appropriate to build a focused reading list in a selected subfield.
- (3) To prepare adequately for the exams, students should plan to devote several months to re-reading and reviewing the scholarly literature in their three subfields of subject areas.
- (4) Recognizing that students have a variety of demands on their time, including teaching classes/labs, taking classes, and other responsibilities, the department encourages students to schedule their exams strategically to maximize the amount of time available, particularly when take-home exams are involved. Spring Break, Winter Break, and during the summer are often ideal times to schedule comprehensive exams as students’ departmental commitments are often

lighter during these times compared to the academic year. However, in the event timing does not permit, students are encouraged to find alternative ways to minimize their commitments during the time in which their exams are administered. These might include canceling office hours or trading off duties if applicable (*e.g.*, having others cover labs in exchange for similar accommodations later/before).

Beyond the requirement that the three examined areas cover different subfields or subject areas, the department does not impose a single, standardized method for administering comps. Some faculty may expect students to prepare their own reading lists that meet their approval, while others have a standard list they give to students. Some faculty may choose to administer the exam as a take-home exam, whereas other faculty may require completion of the exam in a single day and do so in a “cloistered” environment, with or without notes and/or internet access. Students should talk with their advisor and committee members about their expectations for the exams well in advance, and should determine with their advisor who will write questions for each area. If an outside member is to contribute questions for one of the areas, then that faculty member will collaborate with one of the Geography faculty members on the committee to design questions that suit both of their needs such that the question retains an emphasis on and relevance to geography rather than a subject area outside of geography. If not writing any questions, the outside member is not required to attend the oral exam but should always be informed and invited to participate.

The [OSU Academic Integrity Policy](#) (P&P 2-20822) applies to comps, as it does to all of the work conducted at OSU. More specifically:

- The work that students submit must be their own (not plagiarized).
- The work must be original – students cannot reuse writing (*e.g.* literature reviews) from prior courses (not self-plagiarized/multiple submission).
- The work must be properly cited and referenced.\*
- During the time period allotted for comps, students are not permitted to talk with other students or faculty about the examination questions they received. This stipulation applies to all formats of the exam, including cloistered and take-home exams. Inappropriate consultation or collaboration could lead to a charge of violating OSU’s Academic Integrity Policy.

\* If the student has sat for a cloistered, closed-book exam, less stringent citation standards are permitted, but generally, most faculty will expect students to flesh out their citations with a reference list compiled between the written and oral examinations.

Finally, the written component of comprehensive exams should be treated as a formal writing assignment, as would be the case in any graduate course. Thus, written answers should be in grammatically-correct English, punctuated properly, proofread, and formatted adequately. In the case of a cloistered, 6-hour exam, it is understandable that a modest number of errors might slip in due to time constraints, but nonetheless a review of items marked by Word should occur to remove as many obvious errors as possible before submission to committee members.

### **Submitting Completed Exams and Preparing for the Oral Defense**

Students should consult with their advisor and committee members regarding the submission format for their completed exams. In situations where closed-book exams are taken within the department, arrangements will be made prior to the start of the exam for a Geography faculty or staff member to collect the completed exam at the end of the examination period. In situations where students have access to internet resources, students may be asked to email their completed exams directly to the advisor and/or committee members upon completion.

Students should communicate with their advisor and committee members regarding consultations between the written exam and oral defense. Some faculty may wish to meet with students and discuss their written responses before the oral defense, while other faculty may prefer to wait until the oral defense to identify questions and concerns with the answers.

Students should use the time between the written exams and oral defense for careful and critical review of, and reflection on, their examination materials in preparation for the oral defense. In particular, students should identify areas of weakness in their written exams and be prepared to address them at the defense. Geography faculty may direct students to conduct further reading after submitting their completed exams as necessary to correct, expand, or clarify written answers. Finally, students should bring copies of their written exams to the oral defense, along with the departmental form documenting the outcome of the oral defense.

### **Outcomes of the Oral Defense**

Graduate College policy states:

**11.11 Advisory Committee Decisions-Criteria for Passing.** In decisions resulting from a vote of a graduate student advisory committee (e.g., PhD candidacy exam, final thesis defense, or approving a dissertation), a pass requires that the thesis/dissertation adviser vote in the affirmative and that no more than one member of the committee dissent. Graduate programs may impose more stringent requirements.

The Geography Department imposes a more stringent requirement that all such examinations have a unanimous positive vote for the student to pass. Therefore, there are three possible outcomes of an oral examination – unconditional pass (unanimous pass), conditional pass, and failure. If only one committee member is dissatisfied with the written and/or oral portion of the exam (i.e. “fails” the student), then this is considered a *conditional* pass but the student must undertake additional effort to make the unsatisfactory portion of the exam satisfactory. It will be determined by the committee what form this additional effort might entail (typically, rewriting portions of the first exam or possibly being given different questions to answer) before the student is judged to have unconditionally passed the exam. If two or more committee members do not feel the student has passed, then it is a fail.

However, while the OSU Graduate College permits students to petition the Graduate College for an opportunity to retake the examination after a second failure, the Department of Geography will not support any such petition and any doctoral student failing comprehensive exams a second time will be discontinued from the program and his or her assistantship revoked if currently employed by the department as a GTA or GRA.